

March 21, 2010

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent**

John 12:1-8

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector*

**Extravagance**

I've been taking an informal survey of what we think of extravagance. On the whole, when we think of extravagance we think in terms of cost: things that are expensive. In one conversation one of our number suggested that an \$800,000 dollar swimming pool was extravagant. Another disagreed and thought that something more like a private airplane qualified. Others used words like 'excessive', 'indulgent' and 'profligate'. When we think about extravagance, our first thoughts –men and women, old and young—tend to be disapproving of financial imprudence and excess. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

We modify our thinking however when we make it about something other than money: 'extravagant generosity' or 'extravagant love'. There are clearly states or occasions when, at least in theory, we approve of extravagance and, in fact, distrust moderation. We really don't want to be moderately loved or slightly forgiven. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

In practice most of us are, as we should be, 'ethical pluralists', which is to say that we prefer being moderately excessive to being excessively moderate. We know that we should not operate in a single mode in all circumstances and in all relationships. As surely as there is a place for plainsong, so there are times for rich harmonies. There are times for rules and times for breaking those rules and both in the name of love.

Judas Iscariot did what many of us would have done and that is had a visceral reaction to something quite unseemly and that was the picture of Mary of Bethany acting with great physical intimacy at a dinner party no less and seeing Jesus apparently allowing her to do so. I and imagine how this was really not OK with Judas, but rather than taking on the sister of his host he went after something that appeared quite reasonable, with logic unassailable. Isn't that often the way we act in conflict? Deflecting attention from the presenting issue and the possibility that we will be criticized, by pointing at something else, something extraneous?

Years ago I spent some summers looking after British tourists on very low cost holidays in Tenerife and Miami. Now Miami in the middle of summer might not be our idea of the time and place for 'the holiday of a lifetime' but many of our clients were faithful to this holiday company and were being offered exactly that: the chance to fulfill a dream and visit America. We took them to Western Style

hoe-downs; Disneyworld and Key West, the infamous Jungle Queen River Cruise and dinner from Fort Lauderdale and so on. Now, as you may know, Miami in the summer is subject to regular, even daily thunderstorms, often in the middle of the day. They pass pretty quickly and they do it without the virtue of actually lowering the blisteringly hot temperatures. If you are a Brit making your first visit to America for the holiday of a lifetime, these storms can make you pretty unhappy. Some dealt with it by repairing to the bars. But others would come to me and find something to complain about in the hopes of getting offered a discount on their next holiday with the company. They couldn't really complain about the weather, so they complained about whatever came to mind. The clever ones noticed rust on the playground equipment. Others went for the all inclusive meal plan. By the grace of God I kept a straight face when someone unfamiliar with cherry tomatoes described the restaurant as a 'right rip off'. "In those salads they serve the smallest tomatoes I've ever seen." They looked around for someone or something to blame for their unhappiness. And this is basically what Judas did in our story today.

Judas was not really worried about the poor. And Jesus called him on it. Jesus did what we sometimes have difficulty doing and that was recognized extravagant grace when he saw it. He did not chastise the woman for her profligacy or her excess as Judas did and as most of us would do if we were thinking first about the monetary value of the oil of pure nard. Jesus recognized the graceful gift which the church would remember in retrospect as the anointing for burial that did not take place at the proper time. Jesus

Jesus had a way of doing that: seeing past the money and into the heart of the giver. We saw this with the prodigious love of the father for his wayward son in the parable of last week. While the older brother experienced his father's generosity as 'unfair', Jesus told a story of unimaginable grace and forgiveness. The equity question simply got in the way of the older brother's enjoyment of the moment. So it was for Judas. And so it can be for us unless we are willing to recognize that the good fortune of another is not something which we need begrudge when no real offense is being given us. The oil was Mary's and she chose to bless Jesus with it as generously as God blesses us, as extravagantly as the widow who put a tiny coin in the temple treasury because it was all she had, as wonderfully as our sister in this parish who has sent \$25 in response to our appeal for additional funds in spite of nearing her second anniversary without a job and without any income. Jesus allows the extravagant gift and in so doing affirms the giver, affirms Mary in her love and generosity recognizes the widow in the Temple as a woman of great dignity, worth and value where others saw only a poor, unfortunate person perhaps. In other words, extravagant generosity, gives rise to extravagant generosity and extravagant love, gives rise to extravagant love.

We practice generosity with our sustained and sustaining committed giving. That is part and parcel of the spiritual discipline and practice of making and paying a financial pledge. But we engage the practice in part for those times when we can be extravagant in our generosity, and extravagant in our love, and perhaps in the

giving, know ourselves once more to be people who are loved by God; and in part we engage our various practices of Christian stewardship so that we can recognize the extraordinary, abundant grace of God in the extravagance of others.

As ever let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...